

Angela McRobbie, **Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries**. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016; 224 pp.; \$69.95 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback and Kindle).

Reviewed by

Lisa Henderson

University of Massachusetts at Amherst, USA

In early fall of 2014, I left the first session of my lecture course on media and culture and walked into the clear afternoon with a new student whom I'll call "Michael." Michael came from Springfield, Massachusetts, down the road from the University of Massachusetts flagship campus in Amherst, where I teach. Michael was friendly and curious, and took the opportunity to introduce himself and talk to me about my provocations on our first day of class. He was a little older than most college students, he told me, was concerned not to waste time and opportunity at the university, and was committed to media studies—my field—to build his "brand" as a deejay and hip-hop radio host. Michael is White, hails from a working-class family that had spent many generations in Springfield, and imagines himself at a disadvantage, relative to young people from wealthier backgrounds whose parents had attended college. His had not.



Michael's reference to "his brand" took me by surprise. I asked him to tell me about it, and as he described his ambitions and his distinction among area deejays, I recognized "brand," in his sense, as closely akin to "identity" in mine. They were not the same, but the recognition reined in my knee-jerk reaction to the idea of a young person with a brand. Couldn't he come to college, I silently thought, to learn new things, meet new people, experiment, cultivate a critical perspective, and give himself a break in the brand development department rather than relentlessly imagining his future in commercial terms? In other words, couldn't he attend college as I had, over 35 years earlier, in Canada, where tuition had cost \$264 per semester?

In a word, no. Michael wanted a creative life and had no time to waste. He'd have to hustle, he told me—he knew that. Conversation was something he was making a habit of doing—introducing himself to all his teachers, seeking a little recognition in the sea of 300 undergraduate faces, an increasing proportion of whom came from out of state, as the University of Massachusetts, like virtually every other state institution, cultivates out-of-state enrollment as a revenue source.

Springfield is near and yet far. Michael probably did not have the cultural advantages that, say, Amherst High School kids, more of whose parents had gone to college, had. Michael wanted to stay in the conversation with his teachers, he told me, because hopefully we would want to help him after he graduated. He wanted to "do things right." If he was going to take on debt, he at least wanted to be sure he got what he came for. I do not know what Michael's financial aid eligibility was, but through whatever

combination of means, he would need to assemble about US\$30,000 per academic year (for tuition, fees, residence, meals, books, health insurance, and related expenses) as an *in-state* student.

For my part, I was worried that Michael wanted something our research-based, academic program in Communication wouldn't provide: media industries training. Although I and others in my department have long supported a critical production curriculum, we are, first, a social science department with a small but growing complement of "skills" courses in media making, a complement paired with other forms of applied instruction in writing, public speaking, research methods, community service learning, and mediation. Beyond our range of studio courses, we recommend internships for training in media, community development, state government, and marketing, alongside students' academic preparation on campus. We have a terrific range and rate of success with local and international internship placements, I told Michael, and I encouraged him to pay close attention to the internship search assignment he would encounter in his "Introduction to the Major" course as a first-year student. Michael hoped to find paid internships while he cultivated his art and deejay profile in his off-hours. He was in no position to compete for unpaid work during the school year or the summer.

Michael's story is not unusual among current state university newcomers, but I return to it inspired by feminist cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie's *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. McRobbie has studied contemporary cultural forms for over 35 years, from club and rave cultures to independent fashion, always through a composite lens of feminist theory and the British left tradition of cultural studies. *Be Creative* takes on a deeply ambivalent object for many of us who share McRobbie's commitments: the formation of creative economies in the neoliberal era (dating from the late 1970s), in McRobbie's case in the UK between the election of Tony Blair in 1997 and the financial crash in 2008—the crest of New Labour and labor reform. On the one hand, the prominence of culture in the moral and economic life of community and country is welcome; on the other, the terms of recognition are twisted by economic agendas at odds (1) with the ambition of an egalitarian, participatory context for policy and government investment and (2) with the deployment of cultural resources for democratic purposes, what Hesmondhalgh, Oakley, Lee, and Nesbitt (2015) call "cultural democracy" (p. 33).

Although situated in the United States, Michael's story is typical of what McRobbie describes in the UK, where most of her examples come from women in the fashion trade: Michael is young; he aspires to an expressive, artistic life in contrast to his parents' blue-collar employment in postindustrial western Massachusetts; he has no safety net save his willingness to self-exploit in the name of hustling, "going for it," and "passionate work" (McRobbie, p. 36); and he envisions his success as a rise up and out, not anchored by a set of attachments in and around a community, tradition, or collective. He is prepared to work hard toward a life that combines art and commerce, neither art as special precinct nor a job in the traditional sense, and not marked by any expectation of security from employer or government. The university is his training ground for a creative future, not a space of reflection or anti-instrumental education, and universities themselves are eager to control the training market. The situation McRobbie describes at her institution, Goldsmiths University London, with its myriad pay-as-you-go master's programs in event planning and promotion, for example, is ahead of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in this effort, although there, too, marketized training programs in such areas as media literacy are in development. Everywhere, new revenue-generating efforts are redoubled by market-style

competition among institutions, especially as state allocations have been slashed and repackaged as competitive resources.

McRobbie anchors her analysis in what she refers to, following Foucault, as the creativity *dispositif*, an array of policies, personal and institutional practices, world views, aspirations, and even physical dispositions that congeal as a set of norms—norms encouraging legions of young people to enter a thrilling and precarious risk economy. There is boundless evidence that creative economy work is low paid—in fashion, music, filmmaking, visual art, or performance—except at the very top, but that does not temper the enthusiasm of newcomers. Nor does the rank insecurity of knowing that any pay lasts only as long as the current job. Given the prevalence of short-term, part-time schemes in the creative economy, the solution becomes holding down three or four jobs at a time. McRobbie quotes a journalist about the London fashion sector: “Once you’ve tried doing four jobs, you’ll never want anything less” (p. 27).

Such a breathless speed-up, McRobbie’s citations document, is at the root of all manner of psychopathology, from depression to addiction. It is equally at the root of a broad process of depoliticization. Although creative economy workers below the top do not expect jobs to last or governments to provide even stop-gap measures when jobs fail, they believe they have only themselves to blame—their inadequacies of personality, drive, or entrepreneurial strategy—when they cannot sustain themselves or their careers. Gina Neff (2012) makes a similar point in *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*, whose digital content and platform producers in New York’s “Silicon Alley” blamed themselves for losses and bad risks despite a risk-driven economy whose bottom fell out in 2001. In the UK, there is no workplace politics, argues McRobbie, because there is no workplace, just a highly individuated set of freelance pathways and informal networks that exclude as much as they connect. They especially exclude mothers, who are unavailable for the relentless social mixing the sector requires, as it parlays club and rave culture into professional scene-making, “from clubs to hubs” (p. 28) and again into companies (chapter 1) in McRobbie’s analysis. In both the imaginations of creative economy workers and the policy dossiers of New Labour, says McRobbie, celebratory *creativity* has displaced *work*. It is enough to make a left critic reminisce about the shop floor, its culture of solidarity and collective bargaining, and its provision of a lifetime of employment and security (prior to Thatcherite retrenchment), even if the work itself was enervating or dangerous and the security bare-bones. One cohort’s nightmare of shop floor work occludes another’s recollection of social forms worth remembering.

The fast-moving train that is the creative economy—or at least the language of the creative economy—mirrors the rhetoric of urban development guru Richard Florida, a figure for whom McRobbie (among others) reserves a particularly sharp critique (pp. 45–50). Once at George Mason University and then Carnegie Mellon, Florida is now senior editor at *The Atlantic* and director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto (locally nicknamed the Disparity Institute). Since Florida’s (2002) publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Community, and Everyday Life*, followed by multiple editions and sequels, Florida has advised municipal governments internationally to shape “policy” priorities to attract and retain members of the so-called creative class—knowledge workers and the leisure and cultural sectors they desire. Underpinning Florida’s program is “the Silicon Valley model of high-tech start-ups and its enrichment effect on the Bay Area” (McRobbie, p. 48). It is a

model to be replicated elsewhere, a “breezy” business school discourse and how-to promotional campaign that has, strangely, achieved the status of doctrine in many places and political formations. “A new agenda for urban policy,” McRobbie writes, “enters into society through an upbeat, think-positive, self-consciously ‘funky’ fast-fix ethos, with the help of a vocabulary directly imported from marketing and public relations” (p. 48). Florida’s program has its apparent upside: Well-heeled creative-class types prefer their neighborhoods mixed (just not economically), which means there is a place, say, for ethnic food and gay culture and an urban embrace of commercial tolerance (again, just not economic or class tolerance).

But Bay Area development has acquired a generation of critics and opponents as the region has priced itself beyond even highly paid knowledge sector denizens. For many, it is gentrification run amok, to be responded to with aggression, denunciation, and organized protest. Florida has answered with initiatives that postdate without challenging McRobbie’s critique, turning his attention to the question of economic segregation in high-achieving “creativity centers”—a political gesture that I might call watching how the wind blows. With creative class (and allied finance sector) promotion and development having engendered greater urban divides between rich and poor, between a highly educated, well-enfranchised group of knowledge workers and allied finance sector traders, a sometimes-educated and growing group of low-paid service workers, and a small and declining group of traditional “working-class” city dwellers, Florida and colleagues (2015) have mapped economic segregation in cities with the goal of restoring city centers as places of “innovation, creativity, and economic progress” (p. 78) and in turn restoring the “talent economies” they advocate. By one argument, they are mapping the effects of policies they vigorously promoted for two decades, with considerable gain to themselves. With McRobbie’s, our distrust is earned.

For McRobbie, however, immiseration is not the only story. Like many critics devoted to cultural possibility, she asks whether a democratic politics of social engagement can be shaped by and within creative work in the present. For her most sustained example, she turns to the independent fashion sector in Berlin, whose European social democratic tradition endures with more cultural and economic heft than what remains in the UK and even (or especially) in London. London, like San Francisco, is driven by finance and out-of-reach real estate prices despite the cultural democracy efforts and the contemporary successes of the Greater London Council, which survived seven years into Thatcher’s regime but which Thatcher closed down in 1986 (p. 63). In contrast to Michael’s story or the world of creative sector aspirants, whose status ambitions and sincere commitments are coupled with the very economic stuckness they are attempting to leave behind, Berlin’s independent fashion scene is community oriented, articulated to community-based worker training (in sewing and design), and often collectively organized. Although Berlin is an international city, its fashion sector is outside the New York–Paris–London–Milan fashion industrial complex. In Berlin, independent fashion workers have cultivated both “art” and “craft” approaches. Berlin designers and shops are no less passionate than their London counterparts about their work, but they are less imbued with the highly individualized logic of “passionate work” (chapter 4) that roots especially women designers in their state of precarity. In Berlin, by contrast, modest state subventions are available for independent fashion development.

Fashion “art” in Berlin struggles to assert an identity between two poles of German fashion culture: elite consumption and mass production. A fashion art disposition is imported, says McRobbie,

from art schools in the United States and the UK (p. 134), and articulated to subcultural value and the identity of young people. Their designs are presented as “pieces” and their design statements are inflected by art theory, philosophy, architecture, and cultural studies (p. 135). Even the well-known designers McRobbie interviewed were reconciled to low pay under the mantle of art-making, and only cautiously approach the prospect of partnership with international brands—a common ambition in London. In the art sector, fashion design is about the work itself, not, first, about capital development.

Fashion “craft,” in contrast, is attuned to the Berlin neighborhoods where its small collectives assemble and imagine their work to be part of neighborhood ecologies. Shop-front studios are places where people draw, cut, and sew alongside rails of garments priced to be locally affordable and often sold at weekend market stalls (p. 138). As fashion “social enterprises” (chapter 5), they emphasize teaching and learning, egalitarian management, a commitment to ethical issues in fashion and textile production, and a strong relationship to neighborhood women and girls (including immigrants) who might have an interest in sewing and fashion. Even with subsidies, the pay is low and the life insecure, but the production of local value separate from fashion itself—viable commerce, neighborhood integration, solidarity—creates a very different context for living than the anxiety of thwarted rise experienced by aspiring fashion workers in London.

My sketch of the art–craft distinction in Berlin might lead readers to wonder whether McRobbie brings left and feminist nostalgia to Berlin independent fashion. Her research there is deeply rooted in the work, lives, and sensibilities of particular designers and fashion collectives—people and formations with whom she has consulted for years. Indeed “Fashion Matters Berlin” (chapter 5) is her most research-rich chapter, where others rely on a wealth of secondary sources and McRobbie’s earlier research in London fashion (e.g., McRobbie, 1998). Her method is partly documentary and partly ethnographic, layered enough to convince this reader that while the worlds of labor-reform London and contemporary Berlin overlap, the differences are real. So is the nostalgia, which can have defeating but also critical outcomes, where legacy strategies are articulated to new conditions.

McRobbie’s question—Can creative economies be repoliticized in radical ways?—is urgent, and is indeed born of left feminist tradition. McRobbie looks for openings where she can find them, places where she and like-minded others can enact “hairline politics,” drawing possibility from places of fracture—from the “lines of flight” one generation takes away from their parents’ shop-floor lives, while still holding in mind and body a trace of the solidarity ethos of unionized work; from new convergences between middle- and working-class precarity in economies that push the top and bottom ever further away from each other and those at the bottom closer together; from the slowed-down disposition of all work as craft that Richard Sennett (2008) promotes in the spirit of “a good job well done,” a sensibility McRobbie adapts (chapter 6); in Sennett’s and McRobbie’s program of “downgrading exceptional work” and seeing it alongside other kinds of jobs (McRobbie, p. 149); and, finally, encouraging artists to engage with their communities (p. 163). These are practical challenges. I recognize in McRobbie’s questions a scholar’s desire to rehistoricize activism of all kinds and take some political cues from past activists, translating, for example, a feminist critique of labor into more collectivized labor practices in the present, such as those in Berlin, which speak to migrant labor and global living. In the London case, however, the Brexit effect (which McRobbie could not have predicted) remains to be seen, as conservative news discourses promote

isolationism (Lewis, 2016), artists and constituencies lament the leave vote in economic and cultural terms (Prebble et al., 2016) and young Brits, who came of age as members of the European Union, imagine themselves through broadly European frameworks. A majority of young Brexit voters favored “remain.” Young people eligible to vote, however, turned out in strikingly smaller proportions than their older counterparts (Parkinson, 2016).

McRobbie’s account is not a systematic critique of UK policy in the period that concerns her (for that I recommend the 2015 Hesmondhalgh et al. report). Her critical commitment to overdetermination, moreover, sometimes takes the written form of multiple and simultaneous inputs, which demand that readers arrive ready to focus, and which sweep through broad claims alongside delicate unearthings—combinations that can trouble the arc of her analysis. But we need McRobbie’s project—to make visible the harsh terms of neoliberal labor reform in the name of creativity, and to rearticulate cultural production to cultural democracy rather than the vast and hierarchal economy of creative competition. Generationally speaking, neither McRobbie nor I will be the ones to make the new movements, but we have a role to play in the rehistoricization she advocates and that newcomers such as Michael might embody, at least in part, through their education. In the right spirit of empathy with new creative workers, “be creative” can be a different and more generous incitement, and we have McRobbie to thank for leading by example.

### References

- Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class: And how it's transforming work, community, and everyday life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Florida, R., & Mellander, C. (2015). *Segregated city: The geography of economic segregation in America's metros*. Toronto, Canada: Martin Prosperity Institute, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto. Retrieved from <http://martinprosperity.org/media/Segregated%20City.pdf>
- Hesmondhalgh, D., Oakley, K., Lee, D., & Nesbitt, M. (2015). *Culture, economy and politics: The case of New Labour*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lewis, J. (2016, June 24). How the U.K. press woke up to Brexit with that morning-after feeling. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from [https://theconversation.com/how-the-uk-press-woke-up-to-brex-it-with-that-morning-after-feeling-61605#comment\\_1010266](https://theconversation.com/how-the-uk-press-woke-up-to-brex-it-with-that-morning-after-feeling-61605#comment_1010266)
- McRobbie, A. (1998). *British fashion design: Rag trade or image industry?* London, UK: Routledge.
- Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Parkinson, H. J. (2016, June 28). Young people are so bad at voting: I'm disappointed in my peers. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/28/young-people-bad-voting-millennials-eu-vote-politics>

Prebble, L., Kapoor, A., Hough, S., Rutter, B., Lan, D., Norris, R., . . . van Hove, I. (2016, June 24). Arts hit back at Brexit: 'I feel nothing but rage.' *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/jun/24/arts-hit-back-at-brexit-i-feel-nothing-but-rage>